

## Error analysis on subject-verb agreement: the case of a university student in Indonesia

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### Abstract

Examining the error from the second language learner is important. The teacher can make use of it as a reflection of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and classroom teaching practice. However, only few studies conducted in this area in Indonesian context. This mini research, therefore attempts to analyse the error made by the first semester student of English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Culture, Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, Jawa Timur, Indonesia. The research focuses on the error on subject-verb agreement of the student's writing. The implications for SLA research and classroom teaching practice are given as well for second language teachers and researchers.

### Introduction

One of the salient aspects showing development of inter-language system of L2 learner is error (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). The analysis of error which is considered to be systematic is insightful information for SLA researcher, teacher and the learner as well (Corder, 1967, cited in Ellis, 1994). As this might highlight for the SLA researcher, to identify factors triggering it, for the teacher, this would benefit him/her in terms of giving better feedback to student whereas for the students themselves, the analysis is indispensable to language learning improvement. The analysis or error in my opinion is one of insightful ways to measure SLA, which according to (Norris and Ortega, 2003), is "used to elicit, observe and record the language (and language related behaviour of L2 learners) and to enable the resulting evidence in light of explanatory theories of the language acquisition process" (p.717).

Studies on Error Analysis (EA) link to the study of morpheme development for second language learner, as based on findings from Krashen (1977, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006) and Johnson 1982 cited in Ellis 1994), in generally L2 learner develop morphemes in order.

Krashen (1977, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006) summarised second grammatical morpheme acquisition sequence in the following. The first sequence accordingly is -ing (progressive plural copula (to be)), auxiliary (progressive as in 'he is going') article, irregular past, then regular past -ed, third person singular -s, possessive s. Slightly different pattern of acquisition is elaborated by Johnson and Pineman (1986, cited in Ellis 1994). Accordingly, the acquisition pattern initiated from single words or formulas, SVO; plural marking, "Do" fronting, adverb preposing, negative + V, Pseudo-inversion; yes/no inversion; V +to+ V; 3<sup>rd</sup> pers.-s; do-2<sup>nd</sup>, question-tag; adverb-Vp.

These findings are insightful for teachers in that they can prepare what to teach L2 learners after for instance measuring L2 linguistic competence through student's oral or written test.

In this paper, the analysis is focused on "Subject-Verb" agreement.

### Methods

The participant chosen in this study was 19 year old male, studying at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University Malang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia majoring in English and was in the first semester. He started learning English since Junior High School. He had approximately 8 year learning English experience at the time of doing this written work. Accordingly, he never joined private English course. Practically he only learned English from the classroom.

The participant was given three elicitation tasks in which in each task, the participant was asked to write approximately 250 words. The task was done separately from each other with two day interval. The participant was also asked to do each for maximum 60 minute each with no dictionary allowed.

In the first composition task the learner was asked to describe his learning experience, his hobby in the second composition and his favourite subject in the third composition. In order to see the similar pattern of writing, he was asked to write those three composition tasks from different stages; elementary school, junior high school and senior high school.

However, as the data were done in Indonesia, and I could not monitor directly the process of writing of the three compositions, there is possibility that another factor was occurring during that process which might affect the validity of the compositions.

### **Data analysis**

In analysis, I classified the data in each writing task into two categories, correct sentences and incorrect sentences into narative forms which is then described into the total accuracy of sentences from three writing texts. Then I describe the data in each writing task according to a surface strategy taxonomy of errors from Duley, Burt and Krashen 1982. The consideration of employing this taxonomy is to simplify the classification, which according to Ellis (1994), classifying error is multi-dimensional. However, in the discussion the engagement between the data and literature about the source of errors, along with the possible explanations of those as well as other error analysis findings in some studies was given to highlight a broader picture on how we should view the errors more appropriately.

#### **The surface strategy taxonomy of errors from Duley, Burt and Krashen 1982.**

The categories of errors:

Omission is the absence of an item that must appear in a well formed utterance. e.g. I very surprised, the lessons more difficult

Addition is the presence of an item that must not appear in well-formed utterances. e.g. we didn't went there

Misinformation is the use of wrong form of the morpheme or structure. e.g. studit, wes

Misordering is the incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance. e.g. more like

### **The result**

#### **The frequency count of Subject-Verb agreement from composition 1**

The correct subject-verb agreements are: School is/ I have/ I had never/ Teacher explained/ I had never/ I continued/ I did not mind/ My parent made me/ I had gotten/ I like / What is/ I did not love/ Friends are. The sub total of the correct sentence is 13.

The incorrect subject-verb agreements are: It wes (misinformation)/ School wes (misinformation)/ Time is no (misinformation)/ Studit (misinformation)/ Lessons very interesting (omission)/ I wes like (misinformation)/ Lessons be good (misinformation)/ English is very strange (misinformation)/ Be Islamic student (misinformation)/ Teacher so colourful (omission)/ Teacher is very hard (misinformation)?/ I wes in (misinformation)/ It have (misinformation)/ My reason is (misinformation)?/ The lessons more difficult (omission)

The sub total of the incorrect subject-verb agreement is 15. The total accuracy of the subject verb agreement in this stage is 46, 42%

#### **The frequency count of Subject-Verb Agreement from composition 2**

The correct subject-verb agreement: I had bought/ I dreamed/ I didn't have any/ I had never played/ Takraw ball is more/ That is winner/ My hobby is/ That is/ I like it/ I had practised/ I have impression/ I will be. The occurrence of the correct subject-verb agreement is 12 times

The incorrect subject-verb agreement: It the faforit (omission)/ We exercise together (misinformation)?Sport is so much (misinformation)?/ I like it (misinformation)?/I really happy(omission)/I will be (misinformation)?/ I exercise every day (misinformation)?/I was followed (misinformation)?/ My opponent is from (misinformation)?/ The other school are (misinformation)?/ Can followed (misinformation)/ Had imagined (misinformation)?/ When watched (misinformation)/ I will be propetional (misinformation)?/ My hobby...is (misinformation)?/ That is my dream (misinformation)?/ That is Takrawball (misinformation)?/I wes practised (misinformation)?/I often do it (misinformation)?/ I didn't feeling (misinformation)/I a beginner (omission)/ I have a big impression (misinformation)?/ Because really wonderful (omission)/ It geven me (misinformation)/ I was join (misinformation)/ It very fantastic (omission). The total occurrence of the incorrect sentences is 26 times. The total accuracy of subject verb agreement in this stage is 31, 58 %.

#### **Table 3. The frequency count of Subject-Verb Agreement from composition 3**

The correct subject-verb agreements are: My school is/ This moment made me/ If someone has/ He will be strong/ I had most/ I had gotten/ When teaching used/ I had been learning/ I didn't study/ I had never followed/ My next school is/ Favourite subject is/ I had no more experience. The total correct subject-verb agreement is 13 times.

The incorrect subject-verb agreements are: Me be good (misinformation)/ It the elementary (omission)/ Everything is depent (misinformation)/ That is Biologi (misinformation)?/ It the best (omission)/ It explained (misinformation)/ I had never studit (misinformation)/ I live with (misinformation)?/ Lesson wes changed (misinformation)/ And more difficult (omission)/That is Arabic (misinformation)?/ Lessons are used (misinformation)?/It the big reason (omission)/I was chused (misinformation)/ There are (misinformation)?/I wes practised (misinformation)/ I had obligation (misinformation)?/ They are asking (misinformation)/ I had never studit (misinformation). The incorrect subject verb agreement in this stage is 19 times. This made the accuracy of subject-verb agreement in this composition is 40, 62%

#### **The total accuracy from three data**

In data 1, the number of correct subject-verb agreement is 13 and the incorrect subject-verb agreement is 15. There are 15 erroneous expressions captured in these data. The data only show misinformation 13 times and omission twice. Additions and misorderings do not occur in this data.

In data 2, the number of correct subject-verb agreement is 12 and the incorrect subject-verb agreement is 26. There are occurrence of omission 5 times, 21 times misinformation in these data. As is the case in the first data, additions and misordering were absent in this stage.

In data 3, the number of correct subject-verb agreement is 13 and the incorrect subject-verb agreement is 19. These data present similar pattern with the previous finding, omission accounts for 4 times and misinformation 15 times.

The total correct subject verb-agreement is 38 and the incorrect subject verb-agreement is 60. These made the total accuracy subject verb agreement from three data is 38,77%

#### **Discussion**

As Gass and Selinker (2001) said that data in SLA are often ambiguous to generate interpretation, thus there is no “correct” answer. Trying not to be ambiguous, I describe the general patterns from three written compositions rather than examine it separately.

From the data above, it can be seen that the learner made significant number of errors in each task with the accuracy 46, 42% (omission error = 3 times and misinformation = 12 times) in the first composition, 31, 58% (omission = 5 times and misinformation = 21 times) in the second composition, and 40, 62% (omission = 3 and misinformation = 16 times) in the third composition. From the data it can be seen that error on misinformation occurred most followed by error on omission if judged from traditional verb-agreement context, seen from the structural level (Haskell and MacDonald, 2003). However if observed closely to the texts that the learner produced, it is indeed subtler than the data show, as the recent work shows that agreement accounts for syntactic and non-syntactic information and how these information are integrated during agreement production (Haskell and MacDonald, 2003).

As a second language learner he seems to struggle getting the ideas a crossed as well as structuring it into sentences for example making coherent and logical paragraphs in the writings. Hyland (2003) said that L2 writers often experience the burden of learning to write and learning English concurrently. Moreover, Silva (1997, cited in Hyland 2003; Silva, 1993) described that due to the developmental aspect of language learning, frequently L2 written texts are less effective than those produced by native speakers. This occurs as L2 writers may lack of linguistic competence and perhaps are culturally have different rhetorical pattern in writing texts. Besides that this may also relate to the idea of linguistic relativity in which the ideas of speakers of different languages would differ slightly to greatly (Whorf, cited in Steinberg, 1993).

Looking carefully at the subtleties that the data show, there are several points that might be inferred.

Firstly, there seems to be phonological transfer from his first language to English for example the word “wes” which should be “was”, the word “studit” for “studied”. He did write most of the time in the texts especially in data 1 and data 3. These might be common for second language learners in Indonesian case. Lado (1957, cited in Gass and Selinker, 1992) said that “individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture” (p.1). Harlig (1999) asserted that phonological issue is salient in acquisition. This word “wes” instead of “was” may indicate that the phenomenon of incomprehensible input as the word “was” is not comprehended well. But this may relate to conscious and unconscious while writing. This because in the first composition, he most all the time wrote “wes”, in the second one wrote “was”, and in the third composition wrote “wes” again. This might imply that the learner either made systematic errors (when the learner has discovered a rule but it is the wrong one) or post-systematic errors (when the learner knows the target language rule but inconsistently use it) (Corder 1974, cited in Ellis, 1994).

Secondly, he might not unequivocally comprehend the use of “to be”. This can be seen that even though in some contexts he seemed to be aware of using it but in several contexts ignore it, for example; “I very surprised” (data 1), “the teacher so colourful” (data 1). These examples may indicate syntactic transfer as to mean the same thing in Bahasa Indonesia; we would say “saya sangat terkejut” which is translated directly from L1 to L2. This is usually labelled as interlingual transfer (Abbot 1980 in Ellis, 1994; James, 1998; Littlewood, 1984; Friedlander, 1990). The example above also refers to the error of omission (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982 cited in Ellis, 1994) as ‘to be’ is omitted there. But when error of omission is discussed it belongs to intralingual transfer (Littlewood, 1984) or it may be developmental errors, when the learner tries to set up hypotheses about the target language which is confined to limited experience (Richard, 1971b cited in Ellis, 1994). This might indicate that the source of errors are ambiguous (Littlewood, 1984). Error on omission seems to be serious problems for Indonesian university students. It shows significant number in the research accounting for 57, 60% from the total 212 errors made in 17 student’s thesis proposal (Mardiono, 2003).

Thirdly, the learner also seems not able to differentiate between active sentence and passive sentence. This made him produce passive sentences which are contextually should be in active sentences. For instance; “I was very like” (data 2), “I was join” (data 2), etc. Looking from the context, he should write “I do like football”, “I joined the competition twice”. This happen as in Indonesian we do not have “to be”, so this may confuse some Indonesian learner. It is mentioned that the relationship between L1 and L2, “when content and form are familiar, reading and writing are relatively easy. But when one (or both) are unfamiliar, efficiency, effectiveness and success are problematic” (p.11) (Reid 1993a cited in Ferris and Hedgecock, 1998). In that case, it seems that the learner is not familiar with the form of structure of the target language.

Moreover, the learner seemed to repeat the word “studit” for example; “I had never studit”, (data 1). It may tell us the notion of fossilisation. The phenomenon of fossilization might also occur, for example the word “studit” instead of ‘studied’ was incorrectly written four times in the first composition to the third composition. It might denote that the learner failed to comprehend the target language that the word “study” is regular verb thus needs “ed” form to mark the past tense form. Selinker (1972, cited in Han, 2004) said that “Fossilization, a mechanism...underlies surface linguistic material which speakers tend to keep in their inter-language productive performance, no matter what the age of the learner or the amount of instruction he receives in the target language” (p.14). The fact that the word “studit” was written in the same form in those compositions might indicate that phenomenon.

It is also worthy of note that ‘misinformation’ mostly dominated the errors in each composition then followed by ‘omission’ in this subject and verb agreement analysis. There are many other sources of errors which are not the focus of the discussion. However, judging the source of the source of misinformation and omission themselves are complex, as “one misinformed sentence” and “omitted sentence” could be possibly explained in a number of ways. Hence, it seems that categorisation by Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982 can not comprehensively describe a further source of errors in my case study above. In the case of categorisation of Johnson and Pineman (1986, cited in Ellis, 1994), this does not explain a lot and it may be well applied if the focus of error is extended into wider area such as the use of adverb, question tag etc.

It is difficult however to compare analysis of error in my case study with previous one especially in Indonesian context and different participants’ characteristics, since very limited study conducted. However, roughly looking at Mardiono’s research in 2003, it seems to suggests that there is a difference in mostly frequent error, in which my case study, mostly frequent error is misinformation while in Mardiono was omission error.

Overall, it may be that, even not possible due to time constraint, making authoritative interpretation upon those errors (by asking the learner to clarify what the utterances or sentences mean) would enhance the clarity about the source of errors and recognising them rather than making plausible interpretation, judging the errors merely from the context, as has been done above Corder (1974 cited in Ellis, 1994).

#### **Implication for SLA research and classroom teaching practice**

Having observed the errors made by the learner in this study, I would suggest that in SLA research, the researchers should look carefully and examined the source of errors whether it is interlingual and intralingual or from other aspects. In the level of errors, I would suggest that more detailed classification under substance error, text error, and discourse error must be taken into account. Realising that the errors made by the learner is very basic such as omission, and most of the time misinformation, I would suggest that in the classroom he should be taught again correct spelling, the use of verbal sentence and nominal sentence and passive sentence, and the organisation of ideas

in the text, text structure etc. This is done as a learner should be taught from simple to more complex structure (Lightbown and Spada, 2009). Furthermore, it is worth considering providing indirect feedback and relating it into instruction as this seems to trigger improvement (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). As giving indirect feedback might make the learner realise his errors without being embarrassed.

### Conclusion

It is obvious that the discussion of error analysis is complex due to the many possible explanation of source of errors. The issue of transfer from L1 to L2 is another wide domain characterizing the developmental stages of L2 learning. This becomes subtler when the way L1 and L2 interact to each other is taken into account and shape the production of Interlanguage (Angelis, 2005; Haskell and MacDonald, 2003). This might illuminate that error analysis, as one of object of studies; underline the scope of SLA research which is multi-dimensional. (Long, 1990). Thus the teachers of second language learner should carefully consider those complicated aspects in their teaching activities (3126 words).

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### Appendix

This writing was made on October 2009, by Bram (pseudonym) born in Sampang December 7, 1989 at TMI Al-Amien Prenduan Madura, Jawa Timur, Indonesia.

Writing Day 1



My elementary school is SDN Ketapang LAOK 1 and I have studied there for six years from 1996 to 2002 M. It was really comfortable and better memory for me because previously I had never studied except the school. My school was more popular than the other, but at the time no English lesson. This opportunity I studied sejarah, Geografi, PPKN, Agama etc. These lessons were very interesting and I liked it so much because the teacher explained those lessons by good method. At the time I had never studied English and English is very strange in my village.

After graduated from elementary school I continued my study to Al-Amien boarding school. At there I very surprised to saw the boarding because I did not mind to come in boarding school and my parent made me be Islamic student. In this Boarding school many kinds of lessons I had gotten for example Hadits, SKI, IPS etc. I more like Arabic lesson than English lesson because the teacher so colourful, interesting and very funny. When teaching and the English teacher is very hard in junior high school I did not know more about English and the important one of English.

At senior high school I was in one place. It has two languages English language and Arabic language but I did not love English. My reason is same with junior high school and the lessons more difficult than before. My other friends are clever in English language but it won't support me to study English at time.

Writing Day 2

At elementary school I was very like football and it the favorite fun of this sport is so much. Therefore I like it and I had bought a ball. I really happy and dreamed about future I will be the best player, so I exercise everyday at time I was followed a prestigious competition in my village My opponent is from the other school, are very strong rival and more clever than my club. Actually, I didn't have any feeling and can followed this prestigious competition and I had imagined when watched a football game in the television. I will be professional player in this world, that that is my dream at time.

My hobby at junior high school is different with previous that TakrawBall. At Boarding school I had never played a football because on my mind Takrawball is more interesting and enjoying than football, I was practised it every afternoon with the other friends and I often do it in the morning I had been following a competition in Boarding but I didn't feeling any thing about it because I a beginner in this activities and I have a big impression for my future at time that is winner of all competition.

At senior high school My hobby is different again that is pencak silat I like it very much because really wonderful and useful for my body, it gives me healthy body and fresh every time, I had practiced it three times in a week and I was join a competition two times in three years. It very fantastic competition for my life I have impression I will be sport man at time.

Day 3

Elementary school is the better and beautiful memory for me at time. This moment made me be good and diligent child because it the elementary of all students in this world and every thing is depend with elementary. If someone has strong elementary, of course he will be strong and good man, I had most favourite lesson at elementary school that is Biologi. It the best subject for my self because it explained about human and animals Many kind of lessons I had gotten there are: IPS, B.indo, Matematika etc. I had never studied in except in the class because I live with my Grand Parent.

In the junior high school My favourite lesson was changed and more difficult that is Arabic lesson because more of the lessons are used by Arabic language and the teacher when teaching used Arabic language. It the big reason why I was chosen Arabic lesson, I had been learning in the class very much there are: Aqidah, Nushus, prophetic tradition, Al-Quran, SKI. Etc. Outside of class I was practised my language with my the other friends in the Boarding school and the Arabic speaker. More than English, but I didn't study without in the class and I had never followed private course or the other.

My next school is senior High school I had been using for studying, but my favourite subject is same with before and my reason better than previous because I had obligation to my parent and family they are asking me to study seriously. Outside of classroom I had no more experience because I had never studied except in the class.

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